

## Herbert Hoover, the Black Chamber, and Food March 7



Henry Stimson

Many of us could tell the story by memory: Herbert O. Yardley's Cipher Bureau was closed down by Secretary of State Henry Stimson in 1929 because "Gentlemen Don't Read Each Other's Mail." That is essentially what happened. Stimson was a brand new Secretary of State under Herbert Hoover (31<sup>st</sup> President, 1929-1933). The Cipher Bureau, operating under cover out of New York City, was a joint State Department-U.S. Army codebreaking operation. Since the State Department provided the overwhelming majority of its funding, its disapproval meant curtains for Yardley's organization.

Many of us could also narrate what happened next: A new Army organization, the Signal Intelligence Service, took over. Headed by William Friedman, it would build up in skill and numbers and go on to support military efforts against the Axis Powers (Germany, Italy, Japan) in WWII (1939-1945). Meanwhile, a bitter Yardley penned a notorious tell-all book, *The American Black Chamber*, which revealed state secrets. Never prosecuted for this, he was unemployable in U.S. cryptology and would eventually go on to become a cryptologic mercenary, employed by other nations, i.e., China, Canada.

Yardley himself blamed the closing of his Cipher Bureau not on Secretary Stimson, but on President Herbert Hoover --- although not all historians agree with his assessment. This does make some sense, since the Hoover Administration had preached high standards of ethical conduct for its governmental organizations. But what did Hoover himself have to say about his role in this event? In a July 12, 1954, letter to a military intelligence historian (Colonel Truman Smith), Hoover wrote the following about the event:



President Herbert Hoover

“As to suspension of “intercepts,” my recollection is that a code clerk, to aggrandize himself, wrote a piece or made a press statement or let out a “leak” as to his activities intercepting telegrams to and from the various legations in Washington. Stimson’s statement to me was that he had to denounce and stop it, in order to preserve his relations with various embassies. I took no part in this matter. It was the Secretary’s responsibility to conduct his Department.”

That issue aside, Hoover also provides in this letter some information on his own earlier experiences with cryptology. Hoover had directed food relief efforts\* in devastated Europe during and immediately after World War I (1914-1918). He stated that his organization carried on no espionage, clarifying further that the thought of it never came up.

Transparency was very important. He explained that he was acting on behalf of five Allied governments, all with access to any communications employed in the operation. Within 30 days of the November 11, 1919, armistice, he remembers setting up a telegraph service covering 24 nations in cooperation with allied, liberated, and occupied countries. To quote Hoover, “One condition was that all our messages should be sent *en clair*” (French for “*in the clear*.”)

That situation apparently changed. He also wrote that “Subsequently, I obtained consent of all governments for the official sources of all governments to transmit messages by code.” Finally, Hoover suggested that the U.S. Army had, at a minimum, access to these coded messages since “all messages in our system came into American Army Headquarters.”

\* Hoover was involved in more than one relief effort during this time period. He is probably referring to the time he ran the American Relief Administration.

Sources: Background information on Yardley and the Black Chamber, Hoover food relief, "Stimson, the Black Chamber, and the Gentlemen's Mail Quote," Louis Kruh, *Cryptologia*, April 1988, Volume XXII, No. 2.

508 caption: 1) a mustachioed gentleman in formal dress; 2) President Hoover in business suit.